

## emperor's new clothes by orangecoconut

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**Summary:**

“You should like. Be real with him.” Tommy leans his head further back until it's leaning against Steve's knee. “I don't think he likes bullshit.”

Steve thinks about that night at the Byers' and how Billy seemed furious that Steve lied about Max being there. He thinks about Nancy going "you're bullshit" and wonders if maybe she wasn't that far off.

“No bullshit,” Steve sighs, and reaches for the joint when Tommy offers it out. “I can do that.”

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### Author's Note:

originally posted on tumblr, posting it here now since i'm going to add a sequel. also, i realized i should put the fics i'm most proud of up on ao3 so i never lose them lol

warnings: pot smoking, ptsd and other mental illness, fighting, teenagers being teenagers.

There's something about almost dying too many times that makes the rest of the world around you seem minuscule. It makes school even more boring than before, it makes sleeping a distant memory, and pure, genuine laughter harder to come by. There are too many days Steve spends in class, the teacher droning on and on about Darwin and Natural Extinction Theory and all he wants to do is stand up and go, "Do you have any idea what's out there? We're in here, studying bullshit, and out there, right now, are things that wanna' kill us, that know how, that *will*—" but he doesn't, because he signed too many legal wavers to count, because if he *does* they'd just throw him into a mental facility.

So he sits and stays quiet instead, swallowing back all his anxiety and fear of the unknown *and* known, sleep-deprived eyes staring out the nearest window as if he expects something nasty with claws to walk on by.

Nothing ever does. Jane closed the gate.

Somehow, that's *worse*.

Everyone else seems happy with the peace. The kids smile and laugh and ask Steve to take them to the arcade constantly. Nancy has never seemed happier, walking hand in hand with Jonathan. Jane has more freedom that she's ever had, visiting her friends, learning about the world. Joyce and Hopper get closer every day, enjoying each other's company, maybe even finding solace in it. Maybe that's part of it. Maybe the kids use each other to deal with their shit. Maybe Nancy and Jonathan use each other too. They've all been through hell, the only difference was after it was all said and done Steve was the only one left completely *alone*.

He feels dead. He thinks, maybe, he's felt wrong since the first time he took that bat to the Demogorgon, but this is different. Worse. He doesn't feel like anything. He doesn't feel angry, or sad, or even really *scared*, not anymore. There's nothing *there*. And maybe that's the *only* thing nowadays that *actually* scares him: the fact that *nothing* does.

It's mid-January when he finally decides to do something about it. When the emptiness gets so bad he almost skips an entire week of school. When Mrs. Leery, his English teacher, calls him over after class and says, "Steve, your grade has been going steadily downhill. Is anything the matter?" with an expression so soft and concerned, that all Steve can manage is a tight smile and a, "Just tired," before giving some half-assed promise that he'd try harder.

He does try too. He's been trying since the beginning of fucking November. But he falls asleep when he should be reading *Of Mice and Men*, and it's not even *that* boring of a book. He knows something has to change, that something in him is broken and he needs to fix it before he's nothing but some vague shadow of what he used to be.

Steve realizes just how he's going to do that when he's getting the mail one day. Billy Hargrove speeds by in his Camaro, probably going twenty over the speed limit, Tommy, Carol, and two other girls hanging out of the Camaro whooping, hollering, and laughing as the wind whips through them. Steve thinks he's never seen a group of people seem so alive. He remembers when that used to be him driving, him hanging out the window, him laughing. It was a shallow happiness, perhaps, but it was happiness.

And he decides he wants that back

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He knows where to start, and it's not hard. Steve's known Tommy since before puberty, and he knows that even if Tommy feels sorry for something he'll never apologize first. Every fight they've ever had has led to Steve outside his door, an apology on his lips. Only *then* does Tommy apologize too and only *then* do they move the fuck on. Steve hopes that, even after a year of not speaking, that fact hasn't changed.

He brings beer with him, just in case.

Tommy opens the door on the third knock and scowls when he sees Steve. Then he sees the beer and the scowl shifts, eyebrows raising in interest. "Want something?"

"To apologize," he holds out the beer immediately, offers a halfhearted smile. "I shouldn't have jumped down your throat that day. You were—" in his own way "—you were trying to have my back." And he really was, Steve knew that. Maybe not in the best way, maybe not in the *nicest* way, but he was.

There's a long pause where Tommy just eyes him, like he's considering, and then he reaches out for the beer and steps aside, wordlessly inviting Steve in. "Yeah, well... I coulda' handled it better," he's grumbling, words half muttered. If Steve wasn't an expert in Tommy Language he'd have to ask him to repeat himself. "I woulda' been pissed if you'd said all that shit about Carol too, just—" he takes a breath, starts walking towards the steps to the basement where they'd always hang out. "—I knew she wasn't fucking good enough for you man. I knew she'd hurt you."

And.

That's fair too, honestly. Tommy had known what kind of person Steve could be. How *sensitive*. How trusting. People assume their

friendship had been shallow, but it really hadn't been. Not always. Steve still remembered the way Tommy cried on his shoulder when they were kids and his dog was hit by a car. There was meaning there. Trust.

They're down stairs and Steve is cracking open two cans, holding one out when he goes, "Guess I should've listened to you," before downing about half of it in one go. Tommy follows suit and wipes his mouth before glancing over his shoulder and then back at Steve, a grin pulling at his lips.

"How about I kick your ass at air hockey again? That always cheers you up."

"Pretty sure that cheers *you* up," Steve says, and Tommy laughs. "But *sure*, why not."

Steve loses, five to two, but he feels like he's won anyway.

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Billy Hargrove quickly becomes his main problem. Of course, Steve knew he would be before he even found himself on Tommy's doorstep. Billy did *not* like him, and the feeling was mutual. They had barely talked since the incident at the Byers' and Steve was happy with that. He could handle the sneers and even the shoving during basketball. Billy had laid off the kids for the most part and that's all that mattered to him.

Luckily, Tommy has more sway with Billy than Steve originally thought. He assumed their friendship was more symbiotic than anything. Billy claimed the crown that had been abandoned, and Tommy found it easier to follow than not. It was a familiar position for him, after all. But it seemed like a little more than that. When Tommy invites him over to eat with them that Monday, Steve's actually *surprised* that Billy allows it. That he frowns, but otherwise ignores Steve, keeping his attention on the rest of the team. He

doesn't look at Steve again for the rest of lunch.

It's not good enough.

For it to really be right, or this to *work*, Billy has to like him. Steve isn't sure how to accomplish that, hell, he isn't even sure if he *wants* to, but it's necessary.

He starts with buying them all alcohol. He pays for the booze, the weed, offers up his giant, empty house *and* heated pool. It's how he woo'd Carol, even Tommy when they were kids ( minus the alcohol and weed ), and most of anyone else at school. He thinks it'll work on Billy too.

It doesn't.

Billy drinks his booze, and he smokes his weed, and he swims in his pool. But when it's all said and done he still sneers at Steve, still ignores him at lunch, still checks him too hard at practice and mocks him in the middle of random conversations.

"He's a fucking asshole," Steve grumbles one night, laid out on the couch in Tommy's basement. His head is in Carol's lap and she's playing with his hair. It's nice. Not something he's had since Nancy. He missed it.

Also, they're all really fucking high. He missed that too. Getting high with his *friends*.

"I've tried to be friendly, even after the bullshit he pulled--"

Everyone knows that they fought. Or at least, they figured they did since Steve showed up to school that Monday looking like he got hit by a truck, and Billy showed up with a black eye and busted knuckles. It didn't take long for the student body to put two and two together and guess who won.

"I don't think he's impressed by money," Tommy says from the floor. He's leaning back against the couch, head on the cushion, and a joint between his lips. "I mean, he's poor as shit," he continues bluntly, "like Byers level poor." Steve shoots him a look and Tommy holds a hand up in mild surrender. He doesn't *seewhy* Steve is

protective of them, *especially* after Jonathan and Nancy, but he's gotten better about how he talks about them anyway.

"Wouldn't that make him like... *want* to bearound it?" Carol questions. It's a natural conclusion for three well-off teens to come to, but Steve's learned enough over his last year of *bettering himself* to know that's not always true. He thinks maybe Tommy has a point.

"You should like. Be real with him." He leans his head further back until the back of it is leaning against Steve's knee. "I don't think he likes bullshit."

Steve thinks about that night at the Byers' and how Billy seemed *furious* that Steve lied about Max being there. He thinks about Nancy going *you're bullshit* and wonders if maybe she wasn't that far off. After all, he spent an entire year pretending everything was okay, and before that he pretended like having absentee parents didn't bother him. Hell, he still did that sometimes.

"No bullshit," Steve sighs, and reaches for the joint when Tommy offers it out. "I can do that."

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Tommy throws a party that next weekend. It's his and Carol's anniversary so they celebrate it in the way they know best: by making everyone *else* celebrate for them. They get booze and pot and set the house up so that all of Tommy's mom's breakables are hidden away. Billy arrives thirty minutes before the party dressed to the nines and with a keg. Steve wonders how he can stand wearing an open shirt in fucking January but doesn't bother asking.

Six hours later the party is headed into the A.M. and Steve's completely fucking *wasted* when he beats Billy at beer pong and grins like he won Olympic gold. Billy looks just about ready to kill him, and Steve can tell he's significantly less drunk than him and wonders *why* since Billy always seems to get shit-faced at these kinds

of things.

Billy leaves to grab a smoke outside, and Steve— in all his *drunken* genius— decides this is the best time to approach him.

It's not.

There's something dangerous in Billy's eyes when he sizes him up, something that reminds Steve of *that night*, something wild. He asks *what the fuck* Billy's problem with him is anyway, and Billy grins in the kind of way that reminds Steve of a shark. He gets real close, encroaching on Steve's personal space, and he can't help but think about Darwin and the Natural Extinction Theory. How man is just stupid enough to kill itself. How, right now, Steve is the perfect fucking example of that.

"My *problem* with you," Billy breathes, right in his face, smelling like beer and cigarettes, "is that you're a little spoiled rich boy who's used to getting everything he wants." Steve opens his mouth to argue, to say that if he *really* got everything he wanted he'd still have Nancy and not nightmares. That he'd have parents who loved him and a father who didn't think he was a failure. But, Billy continues. "And now, what? You've decided you wanna' be king again, yeah? That it? Make Hill think you give a shit about him—"

"I do."

"Bullshit," Billy snarls, flecks of spit hitting Steve in the face, almost making him flinch. "Your girl dumped you for a *freak* and now you're desperate for friends and fans again. So, here you are, making nice, buying them whatever they want just so they'll like you—"

"Fuck you," he hisses back, "I'm *not*. I missed Tommy and Carol—" and he had, in the same weird way they had probably missed him. "—you're just their *baggage* I have to deal with." It's fucked up. He knows it's fucked up as soon as he says it, nasty and *not* what Steve meant to do when he came out here. And it gets him punched in the face.

No surprise there.

He probably deserves it.

Steve reels back, his jaw fucking *aching*, and Billy prowls in close, grinning wide like a great white, like he had *that night*. He must not expect Steve to hit back, because the punch actually lands and Billy looks fucking *surprised* when he rights himself.

“Is that you’re fucking problem?” Steve demands, filling the space Billy had stumbled back out of. “You think I wanna’ be king again? That I’m gonna’ push you out—”

Billy laughs, “You couldn’t even if you wanted to.” But Steve thinks he’s wrong, and he thinks Billy *knows* he’s wrong. They were both charismatic, both handsome, but Steve was nicer. He was friendlier, more easy going, and at the end of the day that’s someone everyone would rather follow than someone like Billy. Some angry, aggressive, and volatile. Someone they *fear*. They both know it, and it’s clear on Billy’s face even when he says the opposite.

“Newsflash, I don’t *care* about being king.” And he doesn’t, he actually *really* doesn’t. He just— “I just don’t wanna’ be *alone*, anymore.” And it’s probably the pussiest thing he could have said. *I don’t wanna’ be alone*, like some kind of fucking *girl*. He expects Billy to laugh at him, to make fun of him, maybe punch him again, maybe shove him back and go inside to tell everyone what a *little bitch* Steve Harrington is.

He does laugh. But it’s after a moment of surprise, and the sound is more dry than it is mean. “You’re a fucking piece of work, Harrington.” Billy sighs, and looks up at the night sky like there’s something up there beside stars before looking back down. “And I’m watching you.”

And with that, the most *ominous* thing Steve’s ever fucking heard, Billy saunters back inside.

Only after the door has shut behind him and Steve tastes copper does he realize his nose is bleeding.

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That Monday they're all sitting at the lunch table when Billy asks Tommy if he's seen the new Rambo yet. He hasn't, and while Carol wrinkles her nose at all the violence, she admits that Sylvester Stallone is *pretty hot*, so she'll tag along if they go to see it. Steve doesn't comment, figuring if Billy's inviting people then he's not going. He's thinking about taking the kids when Billy looks at him and goes, "You gonna' come?" And Steve's so fucking surprised it takes him a second to find himself and go, "Yeah, sure."

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That Thursday Billy eats his lunch like a man starving. Without thinking, Steve offers up his meatloaf and Billy stares at him like he's crazy but takes it anyway. In response, Billy offers up his applesauce and he accepts it, feeling not like he's won, but that he *might* be close.

"I think he doesn't eat at home sometimes," Tommy says while Steve's BMW is idling in the McDonald's drive-thru. They'd been talking about Billy's massive appetite, and how it even puts theirs to shame. "He eats my entire pantry every time he comes over."

Steve frowns and thinks about it before he's leaning back out the window and ordering two more burgers, fries, and nuggets. Tommy doesn't comment on it, but he shoots Steve a look when they get back and Billy goes, "What's with the extra food?" and Steve shrugs and replies, "Must of got the order wrong."

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A week later he's driving Dustin home from school and figures something is wrong because the kid isn't jabbering like normal. He almost looks like he's pouting, eyes out the window. Finally, Steve can stand it anymore, "What's up, man?" He never thought he'd be *bothered* by Dustin being quiet, but he is.

With his arms crossed over his chest, Dustin purses his lips like he doesn't want to say, but when Steve prods him he finally blurts, "Are you going to turn back into a douchebag?" And Steve's, well, Steve's caught a bit off guard because he *definitely* hadn't expected that, figuring maybe it had to do with Max.

"You used to think I was a douchebag?"

Leveling him with a look that says *seriously?* Dustin goes, "Uh, I didn't *think* you were one, you *were*. Before Nancy you were all *look at me I'm so cool*, and you hung out with Tommy Hill, and now you are again *and* with *Billy Hargrove* of all people, and—"

"*Whoa* man," Steve breathes with a little laugh, "Cool your jets, okay? I'm not—"

"He kicked your ass!"

"I know."

"And threatened Lucas!"

"I know!"

"Then *what* are you doing?" Dustin demands, fixing him with an incredulous look. "Did he knock something loose when he punched you? 'Cause, like, he's *not* a cool dude, and you— if you hang out with him you might—"

"Dustin," he sighs, pulling up to the others' house. Steve puts the BMW in park but doesn't unlock the doors just yet. "I'm not... look, you're right. I was probably a total douchebag." Especially to a *kid*. "But I'm not going to just... change back, okay? I just... need people that aren't kids or my ex to hang out with."

"But we're *cool* kids."

He laughs a little, and it's more fond than mean. "You are," and okay, Dustin and the rest of the party are total dorks, but they're *cool* dorks, and while Steve would never tell anyone that except Dustin, it's still true. "But it's not the same."

And he thinks Dustin must agree on some level, because instead of immediately arguing he just pouts, taking a breath and blowing out his cheeks while he thinks. Then he finally he goes, "Fine," before adding, "But if you start turning into a douchebag again I'm like totally gonna' hit you or six El on you. Or something."

Again, Steve laughs, "Man, if I start acting like that again I *encourage* you to hit me and/or six El on me, okay?" Dustin nods, seemingly okay with that deal, but just in case—

"Hey— how about I take you and the other brats to the mall on Saturday?"

Dustin immediately brightens at that, "The one outta' town?"

"Yup. You guys just have to ask your parents if it's okay."

"Totally! I'll let the guys know! Hopefully Hopper will let El go too. Thanks Steve," and then he's hopping out the car and heading for his house with a quick wave as a good-bye. Steve waits until he's safely in before driving on home.

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The very next day Dustin tells him that Max's mom said she can't go unless Billy comes to look after her. "It's stupid," he huffs, "She's safer with you than she'd ever be with Billy," and even though Steve doesn't disagree with that point he's heard enough about Max's parents to know there's no arguing with them.

"Okay. Billy will come then." And Dustin looks so fucking betrayed that he can't help but laugh. "What? You want Max to come, don't you?"

A pause then, “*Fine*. But you gotta’ like. Keep his ass in line, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, shithead, I got it.”

Convincing Billy to go with him and *six* kids out of town won’t be easy, though.

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He figures the next party coming up will be the best time. It’s right before Saturday, and Steve hadn’t planned on going for the sake of his pride, but a drunk Billy is a Billy more likely to accept Steve’s proposal. He was always nicer drunk. Okay, *no* he wasn’t, but... he may be more agreeable. If he’s drunk enough.

And friendly enough.

“A Valentine’s Day party?” Billy asks, nose wrinkling at the flier Steve had just stuck in his hands.

“Singles party,” Steve corrects, and Billy somehow looks *more* disgusted.

“Those are a thing?”

“*Well*,” Shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket, Steve shrugs. “Last one Lisa threw was like? When we were fifteen? Then she got into a relationship with Jimmy P, but they broke up in December, so—”

“So she’s throwing a singles party. Yeah, no thanks.” Billy pushes the flier towards Steve’s chest. “Sounds pathetic. I’d rather get wasted at the quarry.”

“*That’s* pathetic too.” He points out, “And at Lisa’s the booze and food will be free. Plus it’s mostly an excuse to get wasted, make out with people, then never talk about it come Monday morning.” That wasn’t a lie. Steve had probably kissed a countless number of girls the last

time the party was thrown. Hell, he was pretty sure he kissed Tommy too, but that was three years ago and Steve decided he was too drunk to remember it.

Billy barks a laugh and Steve thinks maybe he's convinced him, "God, that's fucking ridiculous. Why do you want me to go so bad?"

"Because, I want to go." Okay, he actually *doesn't*. It is pathetic. "But Tommy and Carol can't go, and you're single so—" he shrugs again, reaches out to nudge the paper against Billy's hands. His knuckles are cut up again. It's the second time that month and Steve wonders who's the unlucky soul that's been on the other end.

"Okay. What do I get if I *do*?"

"Pot?"

"I got pot, and Cali pot is better than Indiana pot." *Fair*.

In all honesty, Steve had no idea what to give him. He can't think of anything so he settles for, "I'll owe you one," and a smile that promises just about anything Billy could want. It's a good deal, so good that Steve's almost nervous about making it. What kind of favor would Hargrove ask of him one day?

Billy, of course, brightens at the suggestion. "You'll owe me one," he repeats. "Alright, pretty boy, you got yourself a deal."

### **Author's Note:**

hit me up @ <http://drawacharge.tumblr.com/>